

Possible Pathways of FRG advancement: FRGs beyond participatory research

Dawit Alemu
EIAR

In recent years, there is an increasing interest in promoting group-based approaches to catalyse farmer participation in research to broaden the impact of research. Notable examples of group-based participatory research approaches that are spreading widely include the local agricultural research committees "CIALs" in Latin America, Farmers Field Schools "FFS", and Farmer Research Groups "FRG" in eastern and southern Africa (CIAT, 2003). In Ethiopia, the application of the FRG approach by the National Agricultural Research System is well recognized and efforts have been made to institutionalize the approach.

Beyond the sphere of research, the FRG approach is being recognized in technology promotion within the agricultural extension program in the country. In addition, following the public program of group action in promoting rapid agricultural development and natural resource conservations, the possibility of application of the approach is gaining momentum. These trends are igniting serious discussions on the possible pathways of FRGs.

This short note attempts to further provoke the discussion by presenting the opportunities that exists in advancing FRGs along with the evolution of the approach itself.



Currently, Farmer Research Group (FRG) is understood to be a group that farmers voluntarily form

to undertake experimentation on production constraints identified and prioritized by the farmers themselves. Organizationally, a FRG may have a chairperson and secretary elected by members (the only provision being that there must be female representative), a membership that consists of those people who register with the group for a particular season's activity. The membership of FRGs is not fixed, indicating that members can move in and out, although core members will always provide continuity from one season to the next. In general, the essence behind the formation of FRGs is to make agricultural research client-oriented and thereby develop informal, collegial relationship and partnership among farmers, research and extensions (FRG, 2009).

Experiences with FRGs in the country show that in addition to enabling farmers to experiment on their priority agricultural production constraints to ensure increased production and productivity, it has also created different opportunities that are related with advantages of group action like (i) faster exchange of experiences, knowledge and practices, (ii) peer-group influences, (iii) market opportunity identification to market products, (iv) resource mobilization, and (v) improved possibility of the establishment of business entities by forming a formal group like Local Seed Businesses (LSBs), contract units for public seed enterprises, milk processors etc. Above all, there is also an increasing trend in considering the approach as main technology transfer mechanism. The concrete case is the directive of Finfine Zuria zone of Oromiya Region in using the approach as the key technology transfer mechanism in the zone's extension activities.

This emerging dimension in terms of the important role of FRGs beyond promotion of technology adaptation and innovation through better group based participatory research is instrumental in evoking discussion among researchers and also development practitioners about what should be the role of FRG after successful establishment and functioning. The issue in these discussions is not whether the FRGs should remain as FRGs but rather about how effectively the FRGs become more formal and transform themselves into business entities. Accordingly, the key questions in these discussions are related with (i) what needs to be done differently during FRG establishment to enable them to easily evolve to formal groups, (ii) what type of support is required from research and other development practitioners in facilitating the transitions, (iii) how FRG related activities can be linked with other business promotion activities, (iv) how established FRGs can be networked to share their experiences for effective transition to formal groups, (v) what should be the role of extensions in facilitating the transition processes etc.

The on-going discussions tend to suggest the need to create Farmer Research Networks (FRN) based on FRGs for effective sharing of experiences and promotion of the transition of FRGs in to formal groups. Specifically, the suggestion of promoting FRN is justified as it (i) allows sharing experiences among FRGs working in the same commodities, (ii) creates wider opportunity for researchers to work with more farmers and agro-ecologies for the same commodities, (iii) promotes wider adaptation of technologies, (iv) creates better opportunity for extension activities, (v) creates wider opportunity for multi-stakeholder collaboration including private actors, and (vi) creates opportunity for better transition of FRGs to formal and business oriented groups.

In sum, the arguments made above has important implication to researchers and other development practitioners engaged in FRG approach promotion to critically think how the issues raised can be addressed, how they can be validated and if proven good how they can be incorporated in our future FRG approach promotion endeavors.

Reference:

CIAT (International Center for Tropical Agriculture). 2003. "Farmer research group dynamics in Eastern Africa", *The Highlights of CIAT in Africa*. No 8. CIAT.

EIAR-OARI-JICA. 2009. *Guideline to Agricultural Research through Farmer Research Group (FRG) for Agricultural Researchers*.

Gender in FRG: Challenges and Measures

TSURUTA, Atsuko
Short-term Advisor

Suggesting practical incorporation of gender in the FRG approach training and FRG based research projects was my assignment while I was dispatched to the FRG II Project for fifty days in the beginning of 2013. I observed FRG approach training at three Hubs and visited seven FRG based research project sites for situation analysis. The result revealed that most of the researchers understand the importance of gender consideration in research but did not take much action.

It was expected that the researchers would react on gender with a frown as a nasty issue or a weak subject but they took a very positive stance. Notion of gender as an important area to deal with was surprisingly well spread among researchers. However, the lack of practical effort and messy feelings among them were due to insufficient knowledge of specific approaches. Most of the researchers and farmers nicely responded to the questions on gender raised by a Japanese female gender expert. A farmer even responded, "Gender is

important. We try to achieve fifty percent female participation." I challenged them as if I did not know, "Well, females are busy with domestic work, raising children and farming. They are already busier than males so no time for trials and training. Why not leave those activities with males only. No need to push females." A male farmer responded, "No, no, no. Only females can convey information to females." "You know, females' participation is essential as they have to take over responsibility if their husbands died." "Women are more neat so they can follow what they learn properly from training." A woman who was sitting in the corner was pleased by the men's opinions and said, "New knowledge and technologies do not belong only to men. We also want to learn!" What a compelling voice!



I see that time is ripe in Ethiopian rural areas. In order to avoid the importance of gender to be "all word and no action", discussions were made with counterparts and other JICA advisors on practical measures to be taken. Identified suggestions include training for trainers, emphasis on gender in FRG approach training, securing female farmer participants in FRG by percentage, improving the FRG guideline, inclusion of gender data during monitoring and in reports. Gender consideration in research may fall back if it were left only to the researcher's own effort. For steady improvement in gender consideration, its importance should be noted and specific suggestions needs to be made.

INFORMATION RELATED TO THE PROJECT

The following publications are available at FRG II Project Office.

- On-farm research
 - Conducting on-farm experiments (CIAT)
 - On-farm research guide (Gaeden Institute of Alberta)
- Gender
 - "Gender Sensitisation Guideline (FRG)"
- "FRG II Research Inventory, October 2012"